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CLERK U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT Central District of California BY ghaltchi DEPUTY CLERK

UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES DIVISION

In re: Lead Case No.: 2:15-bk-11029-NB

Debtor(s).

(Jointly Administered with 2:15-bk-11040-NB)

CHAPTER 11

MEMORANDUM DECISION SANCTIONING
(1) ANDRES O. PACHECO AND
(2) MANUEL LUNA FOR THEIR
RESPECTIVE ROLES IN "HIJACKING"
BANKRUPTCY CASE

Hearing:

Date: November 3, 2015

Time: 2:00 p.m. Courtroom: 1545

Foreclosures of real property can be delayed by "hijacking" an unrelated bankruptcy case. The scheme is to create a document that purports to transfer an interest in the property to an entity that is or will be in bankruptcy, so as to make it appear that any foreclosure would violate the automatic stay of § 362(a). That typically

¹ For brevity, filed documents are referred to by docket number ("dkt.") rather than their full title. Unless the context suggests otherwise, references to a "chapter" or "section" ("§") refer to the United States Bankruptcy Code, 11 U.S.C. § 101 et seq. (the "Code"), a "Rule" means one of the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure ("FRBP"), Federal Rules of Civil Procedure ("FRCP"), or other federal or local rule, and other terms have the meanings provided in the Code, the Rules, and the parties' briefs. The

persuades the foreclosing entity to halt the foreclosure process so as not to risk sanctions for violating the automatic stay (e.g., under § 362(k)). See generally In re 4th St. E. Investors, Inc., 474 B.R. 709 (Bankr. C.D. Cal. 2012).

Hijackers impose huge costs on all parties and undermine the bankruptcy system. Creditors are hindered, delayed, or defrauded. Debtors to whom the property is transferred often are not participants in the scheme and yet they have to spend the time and resources to avoid being tarred with it. Even the person(s) facing foreclosure – who may be ignorant of the scheme – are harmed because typically they lose the ability to make any legitimate use of the bankruptcy system: a hijacking often results in "in rem" relief that prevents any future bankruptcy from halting the foreclosure. See 11 U.S.C. § 362(d)(4). In sum, hijacking warrants sanctions.

Someone hijacked this case. The question is who.

I. BACKGROUND

In 1986 Manuel Luna ("Mr. Luna") borrowed money to purchase the real property located at 11232 Magnolia Avenue, Riverside, CA 92505 (the "Magnolia Property"). He missed approximately 30 monthly payments and faced foreclosure, pursuant to a notice of default in August of 2014 and a notice of foreclosure sale in early January 2015. Dkt. 44, pp. 7-8. Later that month, just prior to the scheduled foreclosure sale, the foreclosing entity, PennyMac Loan Services, LLC ("PennyMac"), received a copy of a grant deed (the "Hijacking Deed") purportedly transferring an interest in the Magnolia Property from Mr. Luna to himself and the debtor R&J Limited Partnership as joint tenants (dkt. 44, p. 56), thereby implicating the automatic stay in R&J Limited Partnership's bankruptcy case. (The debtor has disclaimed any interest in the Magnolia Property, which is not listed on its bankruptcy schedules (dkt. 15 & 37).) PennyMac filed a motion for relief from the automatic stay (dkt. 44), which was granted (dkt. 69, as amended by dkt. 70) with "*in rem*" relief.

following discussion constitutes this court's findings of fact and conclusions of law pursuant to Rule 52 (incorporated by Rules 7052 and 9014(c)).

The Hijacking Deed was signed in Mr. Luna's name – although he alleges that he did not sign it. It bears the notarization of Andres O. Pacheco ("Mr. Pacheco") certifying that it was executed by Mr. Luna on November 27, 2014 (dkt. 44, p. 56) approximately two months before either the scheduled foreclosure sale or the commencement of this bankruptcy case.

The question is whether this case was hijacked by Mr. Luna, Mr. Pacheco, or both of them, or perhaps by unknown persons who forged the signatures of Mr. Luna or Mr. Pacheco, or who duped them into the hijacking scheme. With the assistance of the U.S. Trustee, this Court has engaged in numerous proceedings to attempt to uncover the truth, involving a number of orders to appear and show cause (dkt. 81, 97, 100, 117, 121, 140), and has received oral and written testimony as described below. Although Mr. Luna and Mr. Pacheco testified on separate days, each was free to attend every hearing and cross examine the other.

A. Mr. Luna's testimony

On April 4, 2015, this court issued its *Order to Appear and Show Cause Why Apparent "Hijacker" Should Not Be Sanctioned* (the "Luna OSC") (dkt. 81). That order directed Mr. Luna to "appear . . . and show cause why he should not be sanctioned under 11 U.S.C. § 105, Fed. Rule Bankr. Proc. 9011, L.B.R. 2090-1 and 2090-2, this Court's General Order 96-05, this Court's inherent sanctioning authority, or any other applicable law or rule." Luna OSC, p. 3:10-13.

Initially Mr. Luna did not appear (*see* dkt. 100, 121). Later, at a continued hearing on July 21, 2015, he did appear, testified, and provided additional information regarding Mr. Pacheco.

After some testimony by Mr. Pacheco, on June 9, 2015, this Court issued its Order Directing Mr. Luna, Mr. Tornay, and Mr. Pacheco, and Requesting U.S. Trustee, to File Declarations and Appear at Continued Hearing Regarding Possible Sanctions ("Further OSC") (dkt. 140). Pursuant to the Further OSC, on September 30, 2015 declarations were filed (dkt. 151) by both Mr. Luna and his counsel, Stephen Tornay,

Esq. (collectively, the "Luna Declaration"). On October 13, 2015, Mr. Luna appeared and testified again.

The substance of Mr. Luna's testimony was that his signature on the Hijacking Deed had been forged. He implicated Mr. Pacheco.

B. Mr. Pacheco's testimony

On May 15, 2015, this court issued its *Order that Notary Public Appear and (1)*Disclose Information and (2) Show Cause Why Sanctions Should Not be Imposed for Role In Apparent "Hijacking" (the "Pacheco OSC") (dkt. 97). Pursuant to that order Mr. Pacheco appeared and testified on June 9, 2015. Thereafter, pursuant to the Further OSC, Mr. Pacheco testified at the hearing on October 13, 2015.

Mr. Pacheco testified that the November 27, 2014 date of notarization was accurate and that he had observed Mr. Luna sign the grant deed on that date. Mr. Pacheco did not support this testimony with his notary book. He testified that the book was stolen out of his car, or perhaps lost, while the car was being repaired.

On October 30, 2015, after this court had received all of the testimony in this matter, Mr. Pacheco, with the help of the U.S. Trustee, submitted a number of documents that he had referenced during his testimony. These were entered on the docket ("Pacheco Documents") (dkt. 172).

II. BOTH MR. LUNA AND MR. PACHECO HIJACKED THIS CASE

A. Mr. Pacheco is a hijacker

The evidence is overwhelming that Mr. Pacheco participated in the hijacking of this case. (In fact, he may have been the principal orchestrator of the hijacking, although this Court makes no finding on this issue.)

Notarizing and backdating Hijacking Deed. Mr. Pacheco admitted that he notarized the Hijacking Deed. He could not provide any credible explanation why, according to both his written notarization and his oral testimony, he notarized that document before R&J Limited Partnership filed this bankruptcy. That timing means one of two things.

The first alternative is that Mr. Pacheco or someone at whose behest he was acting knew in advance that R&J Limited Partnership would file for bankruptcy – because the only apparent reason to transfer the property was to get the benefit of the automatic stay, so if R&J Limited Partnership was not going to file for bankruptcy then there was no point in transferring it an interest in the property. But there is no evidence that there was any way anyone would know that in advance.

The other alternative is that Mr. Pacheco back-dated the Hijacking Deed to make it appear to be a prepetition transfer. Back-dating is a common practice in hijacking schemes, apparently because hijackers are concerned that a postpetition transfer might be too suspicious and might not adequately implicate the automatic stay and stop the foreclosure sale.

Alleged theft of notary book. Mr. Pacheco's testimony regarding his allegedly stolen notary book is not credible on its face, both because that book would be an unusual thing for someone to want to steal and because he admits that he made no police report. It was when he was questioned about this that he first suggested that maybe the book had been lost, but he also claimed that other valuable items were missing including an iPad, which reinforces the conclusion that either he was exceptionally cavalier about the likely theft of his assets, or, as this Court finds, he was not testifying truthfully. Pacheco Testimony, June 9, 2016 at approximately 12:34 p.m. and 12:46-12:48 p.m.

Alleged reporting of notary book's loss to the Secretary of State. In addition, although Mr. Pacheco testified that he reported the loss of his book to the Secretary of State, there is no written evidence of such a report (and, although it is by no means critical to this decision, this Court notes that at the continued hearing, when Mr. Pacheco chose not to be present and thus made no objection, counsel for the U.S. Trustee made an offer of proof that the Secretary of State reported that it had no record of any such communication from Mr. Pacheco). Moreover, supposing for the sake of discussion that Mr. Pacheco had reported to the Secretary of State that he needed to

replace his book, that does not help Mr. Pacheco because it would be consistent with either (i) a theft of the book, as he alleges, or (ii) trying to cover his tracks by disposing of the book, as the other evidence suggests.

<u>Financial incentive</u>. Mr. Pacheco is a real estate broker who was attempting to complete a "short sale" of the Magnolia Property. He would receive a commission if the sale were to be completed. But he was out of time. On January 27, 2015 at 5:34 p.m. he sent an email to a loan resolution specialist at PennyMac stating, "We are getting everything ready for a Friday [January 30, 2015] closing [of the short sale]." Dkt. 172, p.9. But that would be a day too late, as confirmed the next day by PennyMac's employee who emailed, "Short sale approval expires tomorrow [Thursday] and short sale needs to close before FRIDAY [m]eaning funds need to be wired [to PennyMac and be] received by 3pm pst on [Thursday] 1/29 [2015]!" Dkt. 172, p.9 (capitalization and exclamation point in original). In other words, Mr. Pacheco had a financial incentive to stave off foreclosure so that he could obtain a commission.

Sequence and timing of events. The Hijacking Deed was recorded on January 28, 2015 at 12:35 p.m. (PennyMac Motion, dkt. 44, p. 56). Approximately an hour later, at 1:46 p.m. (according to Mr. Luna's testimony at the hearing on October 13, 2015 at approximately 1:52 p.m., while reviewing the text messages on his telephone on the stand), Mr. Pacheco sent a text message to Mr. Luna containing a photograph of the recorded Hijacking Deed. The Hijacking Deed was faxed to PennyMac later that day around 3:27 p.m.

Mr. Pacheco explained that he had (unnamed) friends at the title company who kept him apprised of encumbrances and sent him the Hijacking Deed, and that he forwarded it to Mr. Luna because he knew that Mr. Luna would be interested (Pacheco's testimony on October 13, 2015 at approximately 3:37 p.m.). Those explanations lack any corroboration and would amazing coincidences of timing. Mr. Pacheco's testimony was not credible.

Relationship with Mr. Luna. Mr. Pacheco's attempts to minimize his relationship

with Mr. Luna are unconvincing. Both during his live testimony (on October 13, 2016 at approximately 1:55 p.m.) and in the filed documents, Mr. Luna pointed to a number of text messages and documents (including the Hijacking Deed and a draft of a State Court complaint, dkt. 172) showing considerable contact with Mr. Pacheco.

Based on the foregoing, this Court finds that the only plausible explanation is that Mr. Pacheco participated in hijacking this bankruptcy case, including back-dating his notarization of the Hijacking Deed. He did so to implicate the automatic stay in the bankruptcy case of R&J Limited Partnership, and thereby fend of the foreclosure in hopes that he could complete the short sale and receive his commission.

B. Mr. Luna is also a hijacker

Mr. Luna also played a central role in hijacking this case.

<u>Signature on Hijacking Deed</u>. Mr. Luna's primary defense is to claim that his signature was forged. On its face, that does not appear to be so. Comparing the signature on the grant deed (dkt. 44, p. 56) with signatures that Mr. Luna stipulated were his and accurate (*e.g.*, dkt. 172, p 17), they are substantially identical.

Lack of reaction to Hijacking Deed. As noted above, Mr. Luna's own testimony at the hearing on October 13, 2015, while reviewing the text messages on his mobile phone on the stand, was that Mr. Pacheco texted him a photo of the Hijacking Deed at 1:46 p.m. on January 28, 2015. According to Mr. Luna that would have been an unauthorized transfer using his forged signature. Normally anyone whose property has been stolen with a forged instrument would immediately call, text, email, and otherwise follow up in as many ways as possible. There was no evidence of such a reaction.

Approximately two weeks before this testimony, Mr. Luna completely contradicted it in the Luna Declaration (dkt. 151, p.7), executed on September 28, 2015. He declared that until sometime in the prior few weeks (August or September of 2015) he was "completely unaware that the [Magnolia P]roperty had been transferred out of [his] name and [that] a bankruptcy petition [had been] filed[.]" *Id.*, p.6 at ¶ 8. That was an outright falsehood.

If any more evidence were needed to undermine Mr. Luna's version of events, he also had notice of the Hijacking Deed when he was served with the PennyMac Motion on March 16, 2015 (dkt. 44, at PDF pp. 12-13). That motion identifies the "Property at Issue" as the Magnolia Property (dkt. 44, p. 3, para. 2) and it includes the Hijacking Deed as an exhibit (dkt. 44, Ex. 5, at PDF p.56). Mr. Luna did not file any response to the PennyMac Motion.

Mr. Luna attempts to support his assertion that he did not know about the hijacking by declaring that in August of 2015 he still thought that Mr. Pacheco was "actively trying to work out a short sale or loan modification" and, not hearing back, he then wrote to PennyMac "who I believed was the lender, and requested copies of the documents." Luna Decl. (dkt. 151) p. 6, ¶ 6. Mr. Luna asserts that his copy of that letter to PennyMac "evidences my ignorance of what was actually transpiring at the time, and my being unaware that the property had been foreclosed upon." *Id.*

First, the letter to PennyMac (dkt. 151, Ex.4, at PDF p.17) requests information about an attempted 2013 short sale, not the attempted 2015 short sale. Second, the letter simply requests copies of documents, which could be for any purpose – *e.g.*, suing Mr. Pacheco for his role in the loss of the property through foreclosure – so it does not establish any ignorance of the hijacking. Third, although this Court granted relief from the automatic stay to foreclose in early April of 2015 (dkt. 69, as amended by dkt. 70), thereafter this Court did not keep track of when the actual foreclosure was scheduled to occur, and it is entirely plausible that Mr. Luna did not either. Like many borrowers, Mr. Luna appears to have had his head in the sand and continued to hope that he could work out a deal with PennyMac.

Whatever the explanation for Mr. Luna's letter to PennyMac, the larger point is that his own testimony and telephone records show without a doubt that he knew of the Hijacking Deed as of January 28, 2015. He also received a copy of that document with the PennyMac Motion in March of 2015. Mr. Luna's lack of reaction to the Hijacking Deed is powerful evidence that he was a conspirator in the hijacking.

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Lack of candor about defaults. Mr. Luna attests that he "fell behind in his mortgage payments by three or four months." Luna Declaration ¶ 1. In fact, the evidence submitted with the PennyMac Motion that shows that Mr. Luna had missed 30 payments in the approximate amount of \$56,136.30 (dkt. 44, p. 8).

<u>Lack of candor about experience</u>. Mr. Luna's asserted general unawareness of how transfers of real property work and feigned mystique about the bankruptcy process are directly undermined by the fact that he has been a licensed real estate agent for 10 years (license number 01366025) and he has had the experience of filing two bankruptcy cases himself (6:10-bk-47003-CB and 8:09-bk-15448-TA).

Relationship with Mr. Pacheco. Mr. Luna and Mr. Pacheco had contact for a number of months prepetition regarding the Magnolia Property. Mr. Luna had received numerous text messages from Mr. Pacheco. There was testimony as well as written evidence (dkt. 151, Ex. 4, at PDF p. 17) that in 2013 or 2014 Mr. Pacheco served as Mr. Luna's listing agent for the Magnolia Property for a prior attempted short sale. Mr. Pacheco also had a copy of a draft pleading signed by Mr. Luna (see dkt. 172, p. 17). In short, Mr. Luna and Mr. Pacheco are closely connected.

Based on the foregoing, this Court finds that Mr. Luna, too, played a central role in the hijacking of this case. His arguments that he was unaware of what was occurring are simply not credible.

III. SANCTIONS ARE APPROPRIATE UNDER THIS COURT'S INHERENT POWERS

A Bankruptcy Court's inherent powers, as a court created by Congress, allow it to sanction an attorney or other person based upon explicit findings of "bad faith" or "willful misconduct." *In re Lehtinen*, 564 F.3d 1052, 1058 (9th Cir. 2009). The Ninth Circuit has thus far declined to decide "whether the bankruptcy court must find bad faith by clear and convincing evidence or under a preponderance of the evidence standard[.]" *In re Dyer*, 322 F.3d 1178, 1197 no. 20 (9th Cir. 2003) (citing *Hanshaw Enters., Inc. v. Emerald River Dev., Inc.*, 244 F.3d 1128, 1143 no. 11 (9th Cir. 2001)). This court assumes without deciding that the "clear and convincing" standard applies.

the sanctionee is 'provided with sufficient, advance notice of exactly which conduct was

having acted in bad faith." In re Lehtinen, 564 F.3d at 1060 (internal citations omitted,

orders to show cause have provided both Mr. Pacheco and Mr. Luna with more than

adequate advance notice of exactly the conduct at issue. This Court was concerned

about their possible involvement in hijacking this case and taking advantage of the

automatic stay of innocent debtor R&J Limited Partnership. Both Mr. Luna and Mr.

Pacheco have appeared multiple times on these very issues and have been afforded

ample opportunity to justify the circumstances surrounding the transfer of the Magnolia

first modification added, other modifications in original). The extensive proceedings and

alleged to be sanctionable, and [was] furthermore aware that [he] stood accused of

"[W]hen using the inherent sanction power, due process is accorded as long as

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There is clear and convincing evidence, set forth above, that Mr. Pacheco acted in bad faith, and additionally and alternatively engaged in willful misconduct, by backdating the subject grant deed of the Magnolia Property in order to hijack this case and improperly take advantage of R&J Limited Partnership's automatic stay in an improper attempt to delay foreclosure. There is also clear and convincing evidence that Mr. Luna acted in bad faith, and additionally and alternatively engaged in willful misconduct, by executing the Hijacking Deed and acting in concert with Mr. Pacheco to hijack this case and improperly delay foreclosure of the Magnolia Property.

IV. SPECIFIC SANCTIONS

A. Monetary sanctions

Property. Due process has been satisfied.

As noted at the start of this memorandum decision, hijacking causes significant harm to the bankruptcy system, as well as all parties in interest. Punitive sanctions are warranted. "[T]he inherent sanction authority 'does not authorize *significant* punitive damages." *In re Lehtinen*, 564 F.3d at 1059 (emphasis added) (*quoting In re Dyer*, 322 F.3d at 1197); see *also Mark Industries, Ltd. v. Sea Captain's Choice, Inc.*, 50 F.3d 730, 733 (9th Cir. 1995) (upholding, though limiting, order of monetary sanctions payable to

court under court's inherent authority).

In exercising its discretion, this Court takes into consideration not only the bad faith and willful misconduct detailed above but also mitigating circumstances, including that Mr. Luna no doubt acted out of desperation, he and Mr. Pacheco no doubt saw themselves as doing no more than many others do, and this Court lacks full information regarding which of these two real estate professionals came up with the hijacking scheme or was the principal mover. Based on all of these things, this Court finds and concludes that it is appropriate to sanction Mr. Pacheco in the amount of \$3,000 made payable to the Court, and separately (not jointly) it is appropriate to sanction Mr. Luna \$2,000 made payable to the Court, for total sanctions of \$5,000. Separate judgments will be issued against each of them, in those amounts.

B. Referral to California Bureau of Real Estate

It is well established that Bankruptcy Courts can and should take steps to prevent professionals who are a danger to the public from continuing to threaten the public welfare. Attorneys, for example, are subject to "disbarment or suspension from practice" by Bankruptcy Courts. *In re Nguyen,* 447 B.R. 268, 281 (9th Cir. BAP 2011) (citing F.R.B.P. 9011 and 11 U.S.C. § 105(a)); *see also In re Lehtinen,* 564 F.3d at 1059 (bankruptcy courts have power to suspend attorneys under their inherent powers for "bad faith and willful misconduct," provided the attorney is accorded due process, and disbarment proceedings "are not for the purpose of punishment but to maintain the integrity of the courts and the profession" (internal citation omitted)); *In re Brooks-Hamilton,* 400 B.R. 238, 253 (9th Cir. BAP 2009) (citing *In re Crayton,* 192 B.R. 970, 978 (9th Cir. BAP 1996)).

Mr. Pacheco is a licensed real estate broker, License number 01312531, and, based on this Court's judicial notice from a search of the State of California Bureau of Real Estate website, he is still in good standing. Mr. Luna is a licensed real estate agent, License number 01366025, and based on a search of the Bureau of Real Estate website, he, too, is in good standing.

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Based on the above-described bad faith and willful misconduct in hijacking R&J Limited Partnership's bankruptcy case, and the false statements by Mr. Pacheco and Mr. Luna under oath, this Bankruptcy Court finds and concludes that it is appropriate to request that the U.S. Trustee submit complaints against Mr. Pacheco and Mr. Luna to the Bureau of Real Estate, together with a copy of this memorandum decision. The U.S. Trustee is directed to the online submission form for complaints available on the Bureau of Real Estate website (http://enforcement.bre.ca.gov/eocs/).

To the extent that the Bureau of Real Estate may find it helpful and proper to consider this Bankruptcy Court's recommendation, that recommendation is, as to Mr. Pacheco, to impose a sanction between a minimum of suspension of his license for one year and a maximum of three years. As to Mr. Luna, that recommendation is to impose a sanction between a minimum of suspension of his license for 6 months and a maximum of three years. This Bankruptcy Court emphasizes that it offers the foregoing solely to the extent, if any, that it may be helpful, and does not seek in any way to impinge on the exclusive authority of the Bureau of Real Estate in these matters.

V. CONCLUSION

This Bankruptcy Court finds and concludes that Mr. Pacheco and Mr. Luna hijacked this bankruptcy case. Such conduct causes serious harm to the bankruptcy process and all parties in interest, and justifies both monetary sanctions and referral to the Bureau of Real Estate.

This Court will issue separate judgments imposing monetary sanctions against Mr. Pacheco and Mr. Luna.

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Date: February 19, 2016

Neil W. Bason

United States Bankruptcy Judge

Case 2:15-bk-11029-NB Doc 197 Filed 02/19/16 Entered 02/19/16 10:49:42 Desc Main Document Page 13 of 13

1	CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE		
2	I, the below-named deputy clerk of the United States Bankruptcy Court, hereby certify that		
3	⊠ on the date set forth below <u>OR</u>		
4	if after 3:00 p.m., on the next business day that is not a court-observed holiday,		
5	I served a copy of the attached order or judgment on the parties listed below by placing a true and correct		
6	copy thereof in a sealed envelope for collection and mailing so as to cause it to be deposited in the Unite States mail, first class, postage prepaid, and addressed as follows:		
7			
8	Hijacker Manuel Luna 11232 Magnolia Avenue Riverside, CA 92505	Manuel Luna 316 W. 19th Street Santa Ana, CA 92706	Counsel for Mr. Luna Stephen Tornay, Esq. 5 Hutton Centre Dr. Ste. 700 Santa Ana, CA 92707
9			
10	Hijacker		Garita / tria, G/C 527 07
11	Andres O. Pacheco 4812 Sante Fe St. Yorba Linda, CA 92886	Andres O. Pacheco c/o Franklin Equity	
12		1450 N. Tustin Ave., Suite 211 Santa Ana, CA 92705	
13	Huita d Otata a Turata a	Santa Ana, CA 92705	
14	United States Trustee 915 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1850		
15	Los Angeles, CA 90017		
16	☐ Service information continued on attached page		
17			
18	Date: 02/19/16		/s/ Dina Ghaltchi Johnson
19			Deputy Clerk – Dina Ghaltchi Johnson
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